

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 38 | Issue 1

Article 8

1-1-2021

Andrew P. Chignell, ed., EVIL: A HISTORY

J. L. Aijian

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Aijian, J. L. (2021) "Andrew P. Chignell, ed., EVIL: A HISTORY," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2021.38.1.8

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol38/iss1/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

BOOK REVIEWS

Evil: A History, edited by Andrew P. Chignell. Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xxiv + 499. \$36.95 (paperback).

J. L. AIJIAN, Biola University

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., “There is something wrong with our world, something fundamentally and basically wrong” (Martin Luther King Jr., *Rediscovering Lost Values* (given at Second Baptist Church, Detroit, 1945)). This claim may seem glaringly obvious, especially coming from someone like Dr. King who lived and died trying to change it. But the fact that there is something wrong with the world, and that we know it, creates no end of philosophical puzzles. Some are theological: *If a good God created the world, why wasn't he able to make a better one than this? Shouldn't he be held responsible for anything bad that happens as a result of his design?* Some are rational: *If evil actions involve knowingly choosing the worse (as opposed to simply making an error), then why would a rational human ever do an evil action? Is the choice to do evil fundamentally unintelligible?* Some are epistemic: *If this is the only world anyone has ever experienced, and it's always been like this, how is it possible that we all take the measure of this world and find it wanting?*

Each of these questions is taken up in *Evil: A History*, a new volume in the Oxford Philosophical Concepts series which has set itself the ambitious task of “bring[ing] together eminent international scholars to excavate the sources of prominent philosophical concepts and explore their histories” (Christina Mercer, *Series Preface* (Oxford University Press)). Among the other volumes in the series are books dedicated to the concepts of Animals, Dignity, Embodiment, Efficient Causation, and Eternity. Christina Mercer, the series editor, describes its aim as partially storytelling and partially conceptual analysis, revealing the “twists and turns” in the development of a crucial philosophical concept, and making that history available to “anyone interested in philosophy” (Christina Mercer, *Series Preface* (Oxford University Press)). The volumes are intended to make a philosophical tradition accessible to the lay reader, and also enliven the contemporary discussion among philosophers by encouraging them to “move beyond the borders of their discipline” by considering their topics in light of their larger, interdisciplinary context (Christina Mercer, “Series



Editor's Foreword," *Evil: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2019), xii). This encouragement is meant to come in the form of reflections interspersed between the chapters, in which a piece of art (musical, visual, poetic) is examined, and its contribution to the concept articulated.

In her introduction, Mercer explains a central premise of the series: that each of these concepts originates in an attempt to solve a human problem. The story of a shifting concept is the story of a shifting strategy to account for that problem. In Chignell's introduction, he gives his own take on what problem the concept "evil" is trying to solve: "chaos, suffering and ruin," (Andrew P. Chignell, "Introduction," *Evil: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2019), xiii). He counts among humanity's attempts to reckon with this problem ceremonies, myths, sacred texts, epic poems, and of course, philosophical accounts of evil. Chignell is almost apologetic about the term "evil," which he recognizes has an arcane and magical flavor in contemporary discussion (except in politicized public discourse). Usually, when we use the term "evil" today, we mean nothing more than especially bad human behavior, but this meaning creates problems. Primarily, it creates the tendency to "sensationalize" evil by making it the exclusive purview of moral monsters. One of the benefits of this volume's approach is that it reveals how historically unusual our contemporary account of "evil" is. The journey of this text is a journey into evil, not as a term of condemnation for an enemy, but as a way of naming something we each find in ourselves.

In keeping with the series' premise (that philosophical concepts shift according to shifting strategies to solve a human problem), the chapters in the volume proceed in a largely chronological way, beginning with an attempt to trace the etymology of the word "evil" back to its earliest roots. The account then proceeds to Hebrew understandings of evil, highlighting the comparatively chaotic and ambivalent character of evil in this tradition. The volume moves very quickly through Greek and Roman conceptions into an emphasis on Augustine's privation theory, which bridges the gap into a sustained examination of the Medieval period. This section touches on traditional Western figures like Aquinas and Dante alongside others including women mystics and al-Ghazālī. As the volume moves into the Modern period, the focus is on Kant, with flanking essays outlining the secularization and de-mystification of the concept of evil that occurs during the enlightenment. The final movement outlines how Darwinism and Nazism have complicated that enlightenment account, with a final contemporary piece on Google's infamous corporate motto "Don't Be Evil." The volume lives up to the series' promise to bring together eminent scholars, with contributions from Peter King, Susan Neiman, Brian Davies, and Eleanor Stump among its very distinguished list of authors (Chignell also gives credit to Marilyn McCord Adams, who was involved in the early stages of the project before she passed).

In practice, the contributions to *Evil: A History* can be broken into roughly four genres. The first are anchoring chapters in which an established

expert gives a general introduction to a thinker or topic. A paradigmatic example of this is Peter King's chapter on Augustine's concept of evil. These chapters do not, in general, advance original arguments, but rather draw on a scholar's long familiarity to give a cogent explanation of a major thinker's view. The quality of these chapters is generally very high, and it would be easy to imagine them serving as helpful assigned readings for an undergraduate course. The one exception I would note is Allan Wood's chapter, in which he allows a disagreement with Kierkegaard to rather get the better of him, concluding that, "every sensible person knows that irrational religious fanaticism (by which he means Kierkegaard's account in *Sickness Unto Death*) belongs to the worst and most desperate forms of evil, as well as the most common and contemptible, that human beings have ever devised" (349). In conjunction with the anchoring chapters are others in which an author advances an original claim. In these chapters the advancement of the concept of evil is more of an aside to the main project of the author's argument. While some of these chapters are very readable, they tend to vary more in quality than the anchoring chapters.

Among the "Reflections," a few are close reads of artistic works (as Mercer envisions), but far more are short-form thought projects on extremely diverse topics, from Kant's account of radical evil to the ethics of eating meat. At times these short pieces act as helpful palate cleansers, but writing a meaningful contribution in five pages is a desperately tricky business, and in most cases the argument comes off as unconvincing because the claims cannot be substantiated in such a short piece. In other cases, as with Eleanor Stump's luminous piece on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the reader simply feels distraught that the author wasn't given more space to proceed.

Conceptually, the volume centers on two figures. The first is Hannah Arendt (especially as she figures into the work of Susan Neiman). The book begins and ends with Arendt's famous characterization of evil as banal, a description she gives in an attempt to make sense of Adolf Eichmann, who presents a paradox for the modern sense of evil. Here is a man who, to all appearances, is profoundly unremarkable. He is a competent middle-manager who does his work efficiently with the aim of earning a promotion, and the effect of his efficiency is genocide. Eichmann is the perfect test case for the relationship between intentional and consequentialist accounts. If we were tempted to think that evil (i.e., superlatively bad) actions are always precipitated by evil (i.e., superlatively malicious) actors, Eichmann serves as proof to the contrary, and forces us to choose which of these definitions to prioritize. He problematizes the "exoticizing" of evil that our present definition of evil (i.e., the superlatively bad) tends to create. He is also the place where metaphysical and moral problems of evil come apart.

Various authors discuss Arendt, some taking issue with her account of Eichmann and others discussing Jasper's response, but the use of Arendt that gets the most attention is Susan Neiman's. For Neiman, the question

of evil is a question of the basic comprehensibility of the universe. Carol Newsom makes this distinction in contrasting Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. In Proverbs, the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer. The world makes sense and our path within it is clear. In Ecclesiastes, it turns out that our rational expectation (that good ends can be achieved through wisdom or righteousness) is a fundamental mismatch with the world as it is. Thus, evil undermines our trust in the world. It's in this context that Newsom quotes Neiman:

To call evil banal is to offer not a definition of it but a theodicy. For it implies that the sources of evil are not mysterious or profound but fully within our grasp. If so, they do not infect the world at a depth that could make us despair of the world itself. Like a fungus, they may devastate reality by laying waste to its surface. Their roots, however, are shallow enough to pull up (Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought* [Princeton Classics, 2015], 303).

Part of what makes us feel at home in the world is our belief that everyone is, at heart, trying to do good and be happy, and that if we do well we will generally prosper. Encounters with evil, as in Rachana Kamtekar's essay on Medea, shake that fundamental faith in the comprehensibility of the world. So, discovering that one of the masterminds of the Holocaust is not a moral monster, but simply an ambitious and shortsighted bureaucrat, helps to right the world for us again. Gravity hasn't been suspended. This account also has the advantage of not letting me off the hook for my own actions. If evil is banal (i.e., not superlative or extraordinary), then I don't have the luxury of thinking I am not implicated. If I am not so very different from Eichmann at heart, this should serve as a warning to me.

It's in this context that the second dominant figure in the volume, Augustine, comes into play. The shadow that Augustine's privation theory casts over the history of this concept, and over this volume, is remarkable. Beginning with O'Meara's chapter on Plotinus and continuing clean through to Allan Wood's chapter on Kant, every figure discussed is either looking toward, reacting against, or building on Augustine. The question, beginning in Peter King's masterful essay and continuing throughout the medieval and modern sections, is whether we can accept Augustine's response. Does the freedom of the will really make sense of the suffering of innocents, of the condemnation of sinners to hell? Has Augustine given us a story that makes sense of evil, both within the individual and in the world? King argues yes to the first, and no to the second. Free will, as Augustine conceives it, gives an account that makes rational agents *by nature* capable of choosing the wrong. When they do so, like Medea, they will be able to give a rationalization (in the sense that they will be able to give an account of what factors led to their decision), but these factors were not and will never be determinative of the will. The choice to do evil is the free choice to prefer the worse.

This distinction between rationalizations and reasons gives Augustine an escape from the alienating quality of evil that troubles Chignell and

others. It also coheres surprisingly well with Kant's formulation of "radical evil" as represented by Wood. Evil choices aren't simply errors (as Plato might have it), but neither are they total breaks from human nature as we understand it (i.e., wanting bad for itself). Rather, evil choices represent the human will intentionally and perversely choosing a worse good over a better, because it is more appealing to us at the moment. Augustine would rather party with his friends than treat his neighbor's pears with the respect they deserve. Medea would rather make Jason suffer than live humiliated. Eichmann (perhaps) would rather get a promotion than try to stop the Nazis. Each one rationalizes an action while knowing it is worse, but none of them is fundamentally incomprehensible to us. Each is bad, but none are monsters.

While this account of evil seems to be the likeliest attempt to explain moral evils, however, King's estimation is that it does not explain natural or metaphysical evil, and this is the other thread that runs consistently through the volume. Perhaps we do suffer as a result of our own free choices, but what about all the other suffering that exists in the world? What can account for the suffering of animals, for natural disasters, and in particular why would a good God (if one exists) allow these? One of the most interesting contributions on this topic is Brian Davies's chapter on Aquinas, in which he argues that the Humean accusation that monotheism cannot account for natural evil is actually nonsensical in a Thomistic framework. This is because God's goodness is not moral goodness, and cannot be, and so holding God morally responsible for evil simply isn't an option.

In a volume like this, lacunae are inevitable. But there are only a few that genuinely impoverish the story Chignell is telling. The first is the failure to address how the rise of utilitarianism has altered our conception of good and bad, and thus our conception of evil. The fallout from this shift (in which good and bad are identified with pleasure and pain) is visible everywhere in the later parts of the volume, but its source in Mill is never named. The second is the choice to include virtually no literature, either in the major chapters or the reflections. The importance of Milton, Shakespeare, and Dostoevsky to Western thinking about evil is difficult to overstate, and to omit them (or in the case of Dante, limit the discussion to a short reflection) undermines the stated goals of the volume. If philosophers are to be encouraged to think outside their discipline in order to enrich their work, surely a full-length chapter on Dante's *Comedy* or on Milton's Satan would fit the bill better than a reflection on Google's corporate motto. Moreover, relegating discussion of artistic works to reflections can carry the implication that while the chapters are *serious scholarly work*, the reflections are asides or diversions, and this does a disservice to the literary works, undergirded by deep theological and philosophical acumen, that shaped Western thinking on evil.

On the whole, however, Chignell has put together a volume with a surprising degree of coherence, full of pieces that are both readable and

thoughtful. The aim at making a volume accessible to the lay reader generally hits his mark: the tone of the major pieces is refreshingly casual, and often funny. Further, the story that the volume tells as a whole is informative and interesting, an extremely challenging mark to hit when collecting essays from diverse authors. In taking such a wide scope, it gives both beginners and experts food for thought. In a discipline that too often falls prey to silos and narrow questions, this series and this volume are welcome additions.

Intellectual, Humanist and Religious Commitment: Acts of Assent, by Peter Forrest. Bloomsbury Academic. 2019. Pp. 208. \$153 (hardcover).

BRENDAN SWEETMAN, Rockhurst University

When I was an undergraduate in Dublin studying the philosophy of religion, there was a student who would constantly invent radical views of God and creation in order to show that we could go beyond traditional accounts, solve stubborn problems along the way, and still arrive at an outlook that was plausible and defensible. Over tea and doughnuts, we argued fiercely about whether his strange views were (refreshingly!) original and plausible, or outrageous speculations that served only to stimulate reflection about the nature of God and creation. The present book may be regarded as an extremely sophisticated version of this approach. Building upon Forrest's earlier work, this study is an addition to the recent literature on fideism that we have seen in such thinkers as John Leslie and John Bishop, whose work follows the general approach of William James.

Forrest's argument throughout is intricate and involved; there are lots of pieces, many of which (as he admits) can be described as speculations that are not very well developed, and, we must add, not convincingly defended. Nevertheless, the book exhibits complex philosophizing and clever insights, and offers what some will see as an intriguing set of suggestions with regard to perennial issues. The author's approach is a kind of hybrid of contemporary analytic philosophy and process philosophy, especially in the conception of God that emerges from these pages, for he suggests that initially god does not have a moral character but eventually develops into a being worthy of worship and so becomes God. In Chapters 1 and 2, Forrest starts from the position that he believes afflicts the modern intellectual world—the loss of “epistemic innocence,” where innocence refers to the state of believing without critical reflection. In

